

Close Encounters

of the SM1 Kind

By Ltjg. Matt Peters

The weather was sunny, and the seas were calm. What could go wrong on a day like this one?

We were one week into COMPTUEX, off the coast of Puerto Rico, and our ship successfully had launched two SM2 missiles. We set flight quarters for a passenger run to Naval Station Roosevelt Roads. When you're riding the shotgun cruiser in the battle group, an on-time launch isn't only a goal, it's a requirement.

As a landing-signal officer (LSO) under instruction, I took my place in the LSO shack and began running through the checklist. Everything went off without a hitch. As I was about to call the bridge for an amber deck to break down the aircraft, I received a call from the pilots, reporting they had automatic-flight-control-system (AFCS) problems. Before long, the communication net was full of people asking about the aircraft status. I gave them the standard, "Stand by, we have maintenance crews troubleshooting the problem" reply.

The ship's XO got on the line, and he didn't sound happy. He made it clear he wanted our aircraft "off his deck—now!"

Being new to the whole process, I prayed

for a quick fix, so we could get the aircraft airborne without further incident. Fortunately, the problem was a minor one, and, just as I called the bridge for breakdown, the XO told us we had 30 seconds to get airborne or he was shutting us down.

I heard the ASTAC relay to the pilots they needed to turn to a heading of 235 degrees immediately after takeoff. Big red lights should have been blinding me, but, instead, I passed the XO's comment to the aircraft crew, which put even more pressure on them to go.

We were given a green deck for launch, and the takeoff was normal. After I got the ops normal from the helicopter crew, I thought I'd be able to rest easy—wrong!

I heard over the radio, "Venom, turn right, no left, immediately to a heading of 235 degrees."

Seconds later, the XO spoke to the pilots, restating the urgency of the turn. I asked myself what the #*%@ was going on. After we got the aircraft on the correct heading, flight quarters was secured, and the XO told my LSO instructor and me that he wanted to see us immediately. Scratching our heads, we prepared for the worst.

Soon after we had completed the post-launch checklist, the XO met us on the flight

deck and told us we had come within three seconds of losing our aircraft to a missile. Little did we know, just a few miles away, another ship had prepared to launch an SM1 for their missile quals. Evidently, our aircraft flew directly into the ship's green-missile range—mere seconds before the button was to be pushed. Our captain, who was in charge of the entire exercise and who was watching the radars in combat, saw the bad situation developing and called for a fouled range.

Ask the right questions to gain total-situational awareness. If something doesn't feel right, odds are it probably isn't. I let myself get caught up in the perceived pressure to get the aircraft off the deck. Instead of taking a step back, I pushed a bad scenario even further. Aviators aren't the

only ones who, at all costs, try to get out the event. The battle-group environment contains high stresses from all angles; communication is critical.

As pilots, we emphasize aircrew coordination so everyone is on the same page. I learned the hard way that aircrew and ship coordination is just as important. Our preflight brief with the ship's personnel should have been more thorough; it should have included a discussion about the missile exercise. Had I known what was going on, I would have kept the aircraft spinning on deck until the missile from our nearby playmate had left the rail. It's easy at times to become so focused on a task the big picture fades from view. 🦅

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